
The Ultimate Solution to the Foreign Language Deficit in the United States

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Statement of Problem

In the 11 October 2006 edition of the *Washington Post*, some five years after September 11, 2001 there was an article about the Federal Bureau of Investigation's lack of ability to cope with tasks requiring Arabic language because of a lack of Arabic speakers. On December 7, 2006 the Cable News Network reported that only six Americans at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad were fluent in Arabic and added that the training of Iraqi personnel was faltering because of a severe shortage of interpreters. If you read between the lines of the September 11, 2001 *Commission Report*, the September 11, 2001 tragedy might have been averted had there been enough Arabic linguists to listen to all of the flagged conversations between suspected terrorists. Just go to any browser and key in "Lack of Arabic speakers" or a similar phrase and you can read numerous articles about the lack of qualified Arabic linguists in U.S. government agencies. Of course, Arabic is just one of those critical languages for which there is a shortage of linguists. Reportedly, various U.S. government agencies cannot cope with the demand for personnel proficient in such "exotic" languages as Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Tajik and Uzbek. I suspect that there are recordings of suspicious conversations that are not being listened to on a timely basis because of a lack of qualified linguists.

To a layman, who has never had any affiliation with the intel or security business, it is astonishing and downright frightening that The U.S. government does not have a sufficient cadre of linguists. Judging from the pitiful state of foreign language training (FLT) in our schools and colleges, one would never guess that the foreign language deficit (FLD) is a source of great peril for our country. In general, compared to many other countries, the expectations of students in high school or university language programs are low and fluency is not demanded. I learned from reading spy novels that most of the people in the world who want to harm us do not conspire against us in English. It behooves us to understand what they are saying to one another.

United States Government Foreign Language Training Resources

One interesting initiative is the National Security Language Initiative. There is a fact sheet about this initiative in the *DISAM Journal*, Winter 2006, page 115. The purpose of this multifaceted initiative is to strengthen national security by providing money to train Americans in critical languages such as Arabic and Farsi.

It appears to me that the structure of this initiative is flawed. I believe it leaves open the possibility that many students will take courses in these critical languages, but few will study long enough (six to eight years) to achieve a high level of proficiency. Undoubtedly, students who study two or three years of Arabic will derive educational benefit, but the purpose of this initiative is not to educate students; it is to reduce the FLD. For example, one leg of the initiative calls for providing resources for 400 high school students and 400 teachers in five states in 2007 and up to 3000 students and 3000 teachers by 2011 in additional states. At first blush, these are impressive numbers, but I predict that, whatever, the results of this allocation of resources, there will be very little impact on the FLD.

In the Winter 2006 issue of the *DISAM Journal*, I presented guidelines for the allocation of resources for language training. I have not seen this initiative before I wrote the article. This initiative appears to be a text book case of what not to do. One of the guidelines I set forth with respect to

FLT is: “Don’t give a little, if you won’t give a lot.” That is to say, training individuals to a low level of proficiency is futile unless they continue to study the language and achieve a high level of proficiency. To the degree that the following conditions are met, the high school FLT program will be successful:

- Only academically gifted students with a high level of language aptitude should be admitted into the program
- High standards must be established and maintained
- Students who fail to meet the standards should be eliminated from the FLT program
- High school students should study the language for four years
- Courses should be a minimum of 5 hours per week
- After four years of high school FLT, the students should achieve a minimum Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) of 2. Detailed information about the OPI is on the DLIELC web site: <http://www.dielc.org/>. Click on “testing” and then click on OPI
- There should be a mechanism for those who meet the OPI requirement to continue study on the college level
- After four years of college study, students should achieve a minimum OPI of 3+
- An individual who achieves an OPI of 3+ is on the threshold of high proficiency

I may be selling the managers of this initiative short, but I have evaluated language training programs all over the world and I smell a rat. Foreign countries have launched similar initiatives to train their personnel in English and had poor results. There is simply no room in this article for me to point out all of the apparent inefficiencies in this initiative. I would suggest that those who implement the various legs of this initiative contact Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC) or Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) for assistance and read the following articles:

- “Resources for English Language Training, a Managerial Headache” (*DISAM Journal*, Winter 2006)
- “Academic Attrition in Training Programs: Friend or Foe.” (*DISAM Journal*, Fall 2005)
- “Why Some In-Country Language Programs Don’t Work: What Every Security Assistance Officer Should Know.” (*DISAM Journal*, Summer 2002)
- “Projecting Soft Power through English Language Training”, (*DISAM Journal*, Volume 28 No. 3 2006)

There are some first-rate U.S. government FLT facilities. Among them are the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). These facilities provide excellent training, but their goal is not to produce graduates with near native proficiency. That simply takes too much time. The graduates possess proficiency in the 1+ to 2 range as measured on the OPI scale. Given the relatively short duration of the training, these are excellent results. Individuals with this level of proficiency can perform many useful linguistic tasks, but they can not perform some critical tasks that require near native proficiency. We need many individuals who function at the OPI

level of 3+ and above, individuals whose target language proficiency is sufficient to negotiate a treaty, conduct sophisticated interrogations and immediately engage in high level discourse. Unfortunately, they are a rare commodity. It takes years to achieve such a high level of proficiency. Most agencies cannot spare any significant number of personnel for years of language training. I doubt that the FBI can afford the luxury of assigning many agents to language training for five, six or more years. To make a rather clumsy analogy, we have a lot of Edsels, some Chevies, a few Buicks, and far too few Cadillacs.

I spent almost forty years in the English language training (ELT) and FLT business. I will say quite unabashedly that I probably know as much as anyone about FLT. I am going to propose what I regard as the ultimate approach to solving our FLD. In my opinion, this approach, although very large in scope, is the most cost-effective, sure-fire way to eliminate the FLD.

Proposal Phase 1 - Establishing Charter High Schools for Area Studies and Language (CHSASL)

Representatives from U.S. government agencies that require linguists with a near native level of language proficiency should convene to establish their requirements and establish a plan to meet these requirements. They should form a National Foreign Language Project Oversight Committee (NFLPOC) to oversee the initiatives elucidated below.

The NFLPOC, in cooperation with city officials, should establish CHSASL in cities throughout the United States. The primary purpose of these schools is to teach languages in demand (LID) as well as the culture, literature, history, economy, geography, religion, government of the country or geographical area in which the target LID is spoken. The ultimate goal is to eliminate the FLD in the United States. Graduates of the CHSASL should achieve a minimum proficiency level of 2+ on the OPI. Those who advance to the National University (See Proposal Phase 2) should have the potential to attain near native proficiency in four years of intensive undergraduate study.

Each CHSASL should concentrate on teaching a particular LID. For example, we might have the Pittsburgh School of Persian Language and Area Studies or the El Paso School of Arabic Language and Area Studies. Extant high schools do not possess the expertise or resources required to provide the level of foreign language training FLT required. The federal government and the cities should share the costs of founding and operating the CHSASL. In addition to concentrating on a target LID, the CHSASL should have strong college-prep programs. Each CHSASL should devote itself to teaching one particular LID such as Arabic, Farsi, Uzbek, Korean, Dari, etc. Initial selection of students should be made by competitive examination to assess academic achievement. A language aptitude test should be part of the screening process. Students admitted to a CHSASL should not be required to pay tuition or pay for learning materials. Needy students should be able to apply for subsidized transportation costs and meals in the cafeteria.

Candidates for admission into the CHSASL should commence study in the target LID during a summer institute before entry into ninth grade. They should be informed that their admission into the CHSASL is contingent upon their performance in the summer program. The summer program should consist of five weeks of intensive training, 5 hours per day, 5 days per week. The first week should consist of an intensive review of grammatical concepts and the following four weeks should consist of training in the target LID. The purpose of this training is not only to give candidates a solid foundation in the target LID, but also to screen the candidates for ability to learn the target LID.

Based on my experience with language training, I estimate that only about 30 percent of the candidates who enter the summer institute will demonstrate an ability to achieve a high level of proficiency. Candidates who demonstrate the potential to master the target LID and who comport

themselves properly should be admitted to the CHSASL. Candidates who fail to demonstrate this potential or whose comportment is not satisfactory should be denied admission.

Languages in demand teachers should be either native speakers or approximate the fluency of native speakers. When feasible, CHSASL should be established in cities in which the target LID is the native language of a significant part of the population. There are two reasons for this. First, it will facilitate the recruitment of native language speakers for the faculty. Second, it will afford the students the opportunity to interface with native speakers. If it is necessary to import faculty from outside the city for any discipline, relocation costs should be reimbursed provided that the teachers sign a three-year contract.

In all disciplines, standards for faculty members should be high. They should be very knowledgeable in their fields, personable, enthusiastic about their subjects, and pedagogically superior. To put it succinctly, they should be all stars. If at all possible, those hiring teachers should observe them teach several times before they are hired. Alternatively, a trusted surrogate might observe candidates in other cities and provide feedback. Classroom performance is where the rubber meets the road. Academic credentials are an important factor and an MA in a related field such as English, teaching ESL/EFL, linguistics, or a foreign language should be a requirement. However, it should be possible to waive the MA requirement for teachers with a BA who are exceptional classroom performers. They can be hired on provision that they obtain an MA within a specified time period. Undergraduate and graduate degrees in education should not be considered to meet the academic credentials requirement. In my experience, degrees in education are not even a guarantee of basic literacy. Teachers should have to sign a three-year contract and be on probation for the first six months of employment. The contract should contain a clause that management can fire an employee without stating the cause during the probationary period with two weeks notice.

Background checks should be conducted on faculty members. Graduates of the CHSASL as well as graduates of other high school college prep programs should be eligible to compete for scholarships to attend the National Foreign Language and Area Studies University (NFLASU) (See Phase 2 below). Scholarship applicants should apply to The National CHSASL Oversight Committee. Before consideration can be given to their applications, they must have achieved an OPI score of 2+ or higher in their target LID. The OPI can be administered telephonically.

Sample Charter High Schools for Area Studies and Language

There is a lot of latitude for establishing the curriculum and I do not suggest that the curriculum presented below is the final word. One may, for example challenge the inclusion of Latin as a requirement and basic electronics as an elective. The main point I wish to stress is the prominent place of the LID in the curriculum.

College Preparatory and Persian Language Training

First Year Curriculum

Pre-High School Summer Language Training and Screening Program, (five weeks): One week review of basic grammatical concepts (five days, five hours per day) followed by four weeks of Persian IA Introductory Persian (five days, five hours per day). The purpose of this program is twofold: To put the students on the path to fluency in Persian and to screen out those who lack the aptitude and/or motivation to learn Persian.

- Latin I
- Persian IIA Grammar
- American History
- Science
- Algebra
- Persian IIB Conversation
- English I

Electives: Students must take one of the electives below:

- Computer basics
- Mathematics for Electronics

Second Year

Summer Session (five weeks): Persian IIIA Grammar and Conversation (five days, four hours per day) and mathematics (five days per week, two hours per day)

- Latin II
- Persian IIIB Grammar and Conversation
- American Government
- Geometry
- Biology
- English II
- Persian IVA Reading and Discussion Persian Newspapers and Magazines

Electives:

- Mathematics for Electronics
- Basic Electronics

Third Year

Summer Session (five weeks): Persian IVB Conversation and Advanced Grammar (five days, four hours per day) and Mathematics (five days, two hours per day)

- Latin III or French I
- Persian (VA)
- World History
- Topics in Ancient and Medieval Persian History (VB) taught in Persian
- English III
- Trigonometry
- Chemistry

Electives:

- Basic Electronics
- Intermediate Electronics
- Statistics

Fourth Year

Summer Session (five weeks): Persian VIA Modern Persian History taught and tested in Persian (five days per week, three hours per day) and precalculus math (five days, three hours per day).

- Latin IV or French II
- Persian VIB Topics in Science and Mathematics taught and tested in Persian
- Introductory Calculus
- Physics
- English IV
- Persian VIIA Newspaper Readings taught and tested in Persian

Electives

- Statistics
- Biology

Proposal Phase 2 - National Foreign Language and Area Studies University

Most U.S. universities are not equipped to provide the depth and breadth of LID training that the U.S. government requires. Therefore, I am proposing that the U.S. government establish its own facility to provide this training.

The CHSASL should serve as the primary source of students. A minimum OPI level of 2+ in the target LID should be required for admission. To put this standard in perspective, I do not believe the typical college graduate who majored in a foreign language would meet this standard.

The National Foreign Language and Area Studies University (NFLASU) should not be a research-oriented institution. The focus of NFLASU faculty members should be excellence of instruction. In general, only research that directly benefits instruction in CHSASL or NFLASU should be conducted by faculty members. All students who enter NFLASU must sign an agreement to work a given number of years for a U.S. government agency when they graduate. NFLASU should have an

The Reserve Officers Training Corps program to train those who will render their obligatory service as military officers. Students who do not reach an agreement with an agency, will, at the discretion of the U.S. government, either be assigned to an agency or their scholarship will be terminated. Students must major in their target LID. To obtain a BA, the student must successfully complete 42 hours of LID and area studies courses. The following is a sample of a course syllabus for a major in Persian Language and Area Studies. All courses are taught and tested in Persian.

Course	Credits
Persian Literature 101	3
Persian Literature 102	3
Persian Composition 109	3
Persian Composition 110	3
Persian Conversation 114	3
Persian Conversation 115	3
Aspects of Persian Grammar 112	3
Aspects of Persian Grammar 113	3
Topics in Science 209	3
Topics in Chemistry 212	3
Topics in Physics 213	3
Topics in mathematics 214	3
Study of the Koran 201	3
History of Islam 202	3
History of the Middle East 220	3
History of the Middle East 221	3
Modern Persian History 225	3

The student must take all 24 hours of 100 level courses and choose a minimum of 18 hours of 200 level courses. All courses are language courses and taught and tested in Persian. They do count towards a degree in science or mathematics.

The student must minor in one of the following areas:

- Middle Eastern History

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- World History
 - Mathematics
 - English
 - Chemistry
 - Classical Languages

Working Assumptions

The basic assumptions upon which my proposal rests are the following:

- The U.S. government needs a constant supply of native or near native speakers of some of the more exotic foreign languages.
- Although mastery of a foreign language as an adult requires intelligence, not all intelligent people have the necessary aptitude.
- Some highly intelligent individuals cannot master a foreign language in any reasonable amount of time.
- Mastery of a foreign language takes a long time. There are no miracles, bromides, or nostrums.

It is not wise to require everyone in most agencies to achieve a high level of foreign language proficiency. Many highly intelligent, competent individuals do not have the aptitude to master a foreign language. Such a lofty requirement leads agencies into the bizarre situation of having to fire excellent employees or fudging language standards. Pass the fudge.

Giving an individual a little foreign language training is of little benefit because the individual cannot function at a level high enough to be useful. It is only worth giving a little foreign language training if you are going to give a lot.

Excellent instruction reduces the amount of time necessary to master a language. Therefore, excellence must be the standard. Given excellence as the standard, satisfactory instructors are by definition unsatisfactory. Progress in achieving proficiency motivates language learners to study; lack of progress dampens their enthusiasm. Today's pedagogical fads become tomorrow's bad ideas. FLTP managers should avoid fads. An FLP should employ tried and true methodology. The general instructional approach should be to proceed from the simple to the complex. This may seem like common sense, but there are academics who would challenge his approach. Residing in the country in which the target LID is spoken is not necessarily an aid to learning unless learners are placed in a structured environment, where they are forced to use the target language.

If at all possible, FLTP managers should avoid launching projects to develop curriculum. FLT curriculum development projects are costly, take a long time, rarely produce the anticipated results, and divert attention from instruction.

When possible, the curriculum should consist of commercially available materials selected by FLTP managers and the department chairmen with input from teachers. In order to ensure that the required learning objectives are taught, the FLTP manager should standardize the curriculum and give little latitude to teachers to use supplementary materials. The FLTP manager should ensure that standardized achievement and proficiency tests are used. If the FLTP has to develop its own tests, the

FLTP manager should hire an experienced testing specialist to oversee the development. The FLTP manager should employ the tests to measure the achievement and proficiency goals. For example:

- After twenty weeks of instruction the student must achieve a minimum score of 50 on the LID proficiency test. Students should take a weekly achievement test and must maintain an average of 80.
- A proficiency test should be given about once every three or four months. The FLTP manager should ban instructor-made tests from inclusion in the formal evaluative process. They cannot be used to compare rates of student progress. Students should take the OPI at the end of their second and fourth years in high school and at the end of each year in college. FLTP LID class size should not exceed twelve students.

Conclusion

It takes a long time to attain a high level of proficiency in a foreign language. Agencies generally do not have the funds to send their personnel for the required six to eight years of language training. My proposal calls for training personnel in the language before they begin to work for various agencies. Unfortunately, I believe agency directors, practical individuals, are going to find this proposal a bit too elaborate and costly. To those unwilling directors, I will simply ask, “What are you going to do to eliminate the FLD?” I warn you that, unless you implement this proposal or something like it, 10, 15, or 20 years from now you will still have an FLD. Can we risk going another 10, 15 or 20 years without being able to decipher what our enemies are saying to one another?

About the Author

Thomas Molloy is a retired Department of the Air Force civilian. He served two years in the Peace Corps and then worked almost 38 years at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center. During his tenure, he served as Chief of the General English Branch, Chief of the General English Curriculum Branch, Chief of the Evaluation Division, and Chief of the Programs Division. He spent some 20 years overseas as an instructor, advisor, and manager. He also did consulting work in 21 countries and for several major corporations. He is fluent in Turkish and conversant in several other languages.
